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The Fifth International Seminar

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When the World Broke in Two: Cather's Later Writings

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Victorian Rules and Left Bank Rebellion: Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein

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Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein were near-exact contemporaries (Stein 1874-1946, Cather 1873-1947), and thus were products of Victorian America. As children they both migrated from east to west — Stein from Pennsylvania to California, Cather from Virginia to Nebraska. They came from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds. They both desired careers in medicine, but became distinguished writers instead. And they both were homoerotic. Yet, despite such similarities, Cather perceived art, Victorian society, and "aberrant" sexuality so differently from Stein that the contrast invites speculation about Cather and the Left Bank community which flourished in Paris for the first forty years of the twentieth century and which Stein dominated.[1] The topic on which I wish to focus, therefore, is the polar extremes which Cather and Stein occupied on the continuum of personal response to Victorian orthodoxy.

The personal and artistic conflicts which Cather and Stein experienced were hardly unique. Many (perhaps most) creative women of their generation suffered from the repressive and contradictory sexual mores of the Victorian hegemony. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English cite Jane Addams, Margaret Sanger, and others as examples of intelligent, active women paralyzed "at the brink of adult life" (2) by "the ideology of a mascu-

Pablo Picasso's Gertrude Stein *(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Gertrude Stein) and Leon Bakst's* Willa Cather *(Omaha Public Library) seem portraits of, respectively, confident rebellion and somewhat troubled conformity.*

linist society, dressed up as objective truth" (4).[2] While they may appear to be otherwise, these paralyzing Victorian attitudes were not the embedded commandments of tradition, rustic superstitions, or old wives's tales. Neither were they the sustained manifestation of seventeenth-century Calvinism. They emanated instead from urban industrialism under the aegis of science and were formulated in medical texts, purity manuals, and other influential communications from the morally empowered. Ehrenreich and English call the purveyors of these attitudes "the new class of experts" who "presented themselves as authorities" on the Woman Question (4); and the audience they addressed was the educated middle class to which Cather and Stein belonged.

The phenomenon of this new moral authority has itself been the subject of several studies. Among the best is John and Robin Haller's *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, a title which correctly suggests that medical doctors of the Victorian era "held [themselves] responsible for the moral and spiritual, as well as the physical, health of the nation" (Haller xi). One example will suffice to characterize physicians' attitudes toward women and sexuality. In 1893 (when Cather was twenty and "on the brink of adult life") physician James Weir, Jr., attacked the feminist movement "as an example of hermaphroditism" and predicted that "American feminists would degenerate into either uninhibited libertines or an anomalous phalanx of barrel-chested women" (Haller 77). Females who made suffrage demands, sought entrance to traditional male occupations, and participated in similar radical behavior were, Weir concluded, victims of "psycho-sexual aberrancy" (77).

Cather and Stein were two who survived the damage caused by these self-proclaimed experts to forge their own distinct identities. Stein managed the feat via an overt rebellion against the Gilded Cage of Victorian America and emerged as a woman who by sheer force of personality demanded that her radical art and unorthodox sexuality be recognized and accepted. Cather — though not without scars — chose an overtly quiet conservative adherence to socially acceptable and "scientifically" approved behavior.

More factors than their coincidental backgrounds suggest that Cather should have emulated Stein's actions and affiliated with the Paris Left Bank community, "where life was economically, psychologically, and politically easier" (Benstock 13). Cather was a life-long devotee of French culture; she took frequent trips to France; the great love of her life, Isabelle McClung, resided in Paris; and Cather visited Isabelle regularly. More significantly, a commitment to the Left Bank life style could have ameliorated some of the psychosexual conflicts which troubled Cather and which grew more pronounced as she aged.[3] Yet, Cather did not visit Stein's expatriate salon at 27 Rue des Fleurus or make any known effort to participate in Left Bank life. A significant question, then, remains. Why did Cather not break with Red Cloud when she could have stayed in Paris, even though, as she herself said, every time she crossed the Missouri River when returning to Nebraska she was so confused she "could not decide which was the real and which the fake 'me'" (*WCiP* 37)?

The superficially satisfying argument that Cather did not understand Stein's reasons for revolt and disagreed with her unorthodox life style is flawed. Like Stein, who openly assumed and fulfilled the masculine role in her "marriage" to Alice B. Toklas, Cather no less openly but more quietly occupied that same dominant role in her long-term relationship with Edith Lewis, with whom she lived from 1908 until her death in 1947. Among others, Leon Edel recognizes that Lewis was so subservient to Cather that she was "worshipful" (189). A more logical explanation of Cather's refusal to associate with the Left Bank is that by the late nineteenth-century the Victorian moralists had criminalized lesbianism and the type of relationship which Cather and Lewis shared. As Joanna Russ notes, the "innocent rightness in feelings of love for and attraction to women" which an earlier generation enjoyed was no longer possible (79), and Cather would not risk being considered "inverted" — a pejorative term Freud applied to homoeroticism (BW 554).[4]

Cather's only manifest rebellion against Victorian sexual orthodoxy, therefore, was her well-documented period of adolescent cross-dressing. Coincidental with this minor revolt was her determination to become a physician, a "man" of science. Both the overt expressions of masculinity and the attempts to enter medicine ended as Cather probably realized that women were not welcomed into a fraternity of physicians whose "scientific" studies had convinced them that "women's inferiority was clearly evident in almost every analysis of the brain" (Haller 50) and who warned that "women whose activities had taken them beyond the boundaries of polite society would inevitably degenerate into rooftop mehitabels with voracious sexual appetites or depersonalized neuters sublimating their natural instincts for those of a neurotic drone" (84).

Given her devoted adolescent interest in medicine and her close relationship with Red Cloud physicians, we can safely assume that Cather was informed of the latest medical pronouncements and took them seriously. She knew, therefore, that continuing her masculine guise and persisting in a medical career would guarantee her being publicly identified as a sexual deviate and would invite public censuring which she could not tolerate.[5] Though the world of fiction-making was also male dominated and did not recruit women, it at least grudgingly admitted them, thus Cather could redirect her energies to that profession.[6] Accepting prescribed concepts of normality and social roles, and unable to modify her sexual ethic radically enough to rebel publicly against perceived scientific correctness, Cather was unwilling to persist in overt nonconformity. Her antisocial "William" period was tolerated by a hometown that, like the authors of the purity manuals, did not want to cope with matters taboo and thus dis-

missed the cross-dressing as mere theatrical tomboyism. However, neither Red Cloud nor the cosmopolitan centers of the northeast were willing to ignore such "aberrancy" once Cather reached her majority. Consequently, rather than extend her civil disobedience into full-fledged combat with the moral/somatic arbiters, Cather would suppress her sexuality as well as her original professional impulses, thereby ensuring her psychic tensions.

Though Stein experienced the same pressures against women in medicine and was equally familiar with the prevailing attitudes toward females, she persisted in her medical studies through graduate school at Johns Hopkins and participated in elementary medical work. She deserted medicine not because being a physician was taboo and would get her labelled with derogatory names, but because her interests wandered to Europe and literature and she failed a course in obstetrics during her final semester.[7] Rather than face the humiliation of making up the course in summer school, and disappointed in a discipline dominated by arbitrary and petty males, Stein abandoned her medical career (Brinnin 38-39). "Inverted" like Cather, Stein felt the attendant conflicts no less acutely than her Nebraskan contemporary. Stein's response, however, was to separate literally and psychosexually from a society which she readily recognized as being "provincial, restrictive, and belonged — like Queen Victoria — to another century" (Benstock 12). Once removed geographically and psychologically from such provincialism, Stein wrote with comparative openness about her lesbianism in *Q.E.D.* (1903) and soon thereafter published *Three Lives* (1909), a frank examination of the erotic lives of a trio of servant girls. With such works Stein "stepped beyond the pull of literary gravity" (Brinnin 124), institutionalized her lifestyle into the influential literary salon of Paris, and helped define what modern literature would become.

Significantly, Cather would not publish her first novel for three years after Stein's *Three Lives*; and *Alexander's Bridge* documents anything but a radical break with Victorian androcentrism. It is instead a conscious effort by Cather to be admitted to the fraternity of novel writers, and as part of the initiation she inflicts a humiliating subservience on Winifred Alexander and Hilda Burgoyne. Though both intelligent, artistic women, they acquiesce sexually and socially to a protagonist who is arrogant, self-serving, and who exemplifies the mundane Victorian "hero."[8] Cather avoids explicit mention of homoeroticism and presents female sexuality in the obedient, conventional mode advocated by contemporary physicians and other "scientific" moralists.

Cather would subsequently write more maturely about female sexuality than she did in *Alexander's Bridge*, but she never dealt openly with homoeroticism; and far from celebrating eroticism, as did Stein, she continued to depict it as dangerous and reprehensible. I quickly cite as examples Marie Tovesky Shabata and Emil Bergson of *O Pioneers!*, who are gunned down for surrendering to their sexual passions; and Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady*, who is exiled to Latin America and sexual/economic dependence upon a wealthy old man because of her adultery. Even Ántonia Shimerda, whose personality the proper Victorian Jim Burden misconstrues, deteriorates into premature haggardness as a consequence of her rebellious passions and the bastardy of her first born.[9] Clearly, then, Cather never approached the sexual frankness or felt comfortable with the female autonomy which Stein expressed in *Q.E.D.* and *Three Lives*.

Stein realized that being lesbian did not mean she was male or that her sensibilities were masculine. She realized too that she need not sacrifice either her sense of femaleness or her sense of community to be content with her homoeroticism. Cynthia Secor notes with insight that Stein deliberately writes "beyond the patriarchal tradition and is, therefore, difficult to grasp until one understands that the male, as such, the masculine, the hierarchical, the phallic, the violent, the conflictual, the linear, the direct, and the masterful are not what she writes about" (301). Unlike Cather, Stein "created out of the fundamental female sense that the womb, the room, the nipples, the tender buttons, are a never-ending fount of life and nourishment" (308).

Given Stein's responses as counterpoint we can hardly deny that Cather's tensions emanated less from dictums per se than from her unwillingness to contravene principles which experience, intelligence, and biology should have taught her were detrimental. Since in other matters Cather showed herself to be resolute, we cannot reasonably argue that she conformed out of simple fear of retaliation.[10] More logically, she obeyed because she concurred with the physicians, the pseudo-scientific moralists, and other "authorities" of the Victorian era. Herself a frustrated physician who sublimated her frustrations into fictive doctors (as in *Shadows on the Rock*), she did not take lightly the admonitions of Victorian medicine men concerning the horrors of human sexuality. Insofar as Cather was concerned, society and its spokespersons were essentially correct in their sexual attitudes. As she indicated in her disapproving review of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and its heroine Edna Pontellier, Cather viewed passion as being both morally and physiologically damaging, especially in women. The review, as Woodress notes, shows Cather's lack of sympathy for nonconforming women and reveals her own "belief in romantic love as a destructive force" (142-3).

Left with no psychological scapegoat such as the Victorian moralists to blame for her discontents, Cather was thus forced back into the self for someone or something to censure. In short, unlike Stein who derived much of her self esteem and creative energy from an actively confrontational relationship with Victorian norms, Cather did not adopt any exoteric "they" to cast as an antagonist in her psychosexual tragedies.[11] Consequently, while Stein's battle with

convention was open and fiery, Cather was forced into a guerrilla war for autonomy. This persistent, yet desperate struggle is best seen in her masterpiece *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in which she details the quiet battles of three disparate women against the arrogance and indifference of powerful churchmen. Magdalene Scales, Isabella Olivares, and old Sada epitomize physical courage, sexual liberation, and spiritual endurance, qualities which are either ignored or exploited by Latour and Vaillant. Never overtly rebellious, the women by their conformity ironically emphasize the superciliousness of the righteous male ego and reveal the suppressed conflicts which haunt the subtexts of Cather's fiction.[12] As Magdalene, Isabella, and Sada illustrate, the crisis of gender identity which Cather experienced as a child and which is most overtly identifiable in her patronymic "William Cather" years of cross-dressing foreshadowed a sexual dichotomy which in the words of Susan Gubar "was profound enough to inform not only the themes but even the structure of her mature fiction" (465).

While writing may have been a process of sexual self-discovery and at least partial liberation for Wharton, Colette, Stein and other women associated with the Paris expatriate life, it was not so for Cather. In "The Willing Muse," in an accidental moment of introspection, Cather uses Freud's term for homoeroticism and mentions the tendency toward "inverse development" (*Collected Short Fiction* 114) — an inversion implied by the women of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and by the motif of the imprisoned self emblematized elsewhere in her fiction by caves, rooms, graves, and wheel-chair bound protagonists.[13] For Cather, writing was a process by which she consciously tried to mask but unconsciously struggled to reveal her homoeroticism. Her resultant dilemma manifests itself in interesting psychoanalytic coordinates, some as overt as her post-pubescent transvestism and others as subtle as the iconoclastic women we encounter in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

We cannot safely surmise the effect had Cather been more open with her homoeroticism or chosen the fellowship offered by the Left Bank group. We only know that Cather did not elect to associate herself openly with the lesbian community, though that option was available to her from the earliest stages of her struggle as a writer. Moreover, as a result of her decision to reside in a homophobic America and to suppress her homoeroticism, she consequently was conflicted both personally and artistically. Had she emigrated and become part of the Left Bank community, her fiction could well lack many of the tensions which her unresolved conflicts generated and which give her narratives their distinctive tone and texture.

In conclusion, we can recognize that several significant ironies resulted from Cather's conformity to Victorian mores. The first, of course, is that in conforming, Cather guaranteed the conflicts that fueled much of her creative energy. Just as Stein's decision to live and write openly as a lesbian was the essence of her art, so on the contrary was Cather's decision to deny her homoeroticism the essence of her artistic processes.

Second, rather than being an obstacle which Cather had to overcome in order to produce her fiction, her homoeroticism was the energy source for her creativity. Cather's primary sexual attraction was to other females and that attraction perplexed her throughout her life because homoeroticism clashed with her strong sense of social propriety and popular scientific teachings. Yet, as her refusal to join Stein's expatriate life shows, she took no action which might have significantly alleviated those conflicts. Her creative genius was fueled by psychic dissonance and protected by an intuitive (perhaps even premeditated) awareness that the dissonance was not to be tampered with.

Third, and more arguable, is the irony associated with the relative positions which Cather and Stein now occupy in American letters. Though Stein rightfully remains famous for her courageous rebellion and for her influence on Hemingway and others who subsequently surpassed her in both fame and talent, her own works have fallen into the category of interesting curiosities. Cather's fiction, on the contrary, has survived cycles of neglect and excessive enthusiasm to take its place among the top ranks of modernist literature. It has attained a popular and critical success which Stein's work cannot match. In short, the quiet, conservative, repressive conformist has prevailed in an era which prides itself upon and is defined largely by its quarrel with the Victorian era which Cather exemplifies.

NOTES

1. As those familiar with Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* will recognize, the Left Bank was a complex cultural phenomenon. I am only concerned here with the pertinent question of why Cather never affiliated with the Left Bank (both in its actuality and in what it symbolized). As for dates, Stein took up residence at 27 Rue de Fleurus in early 1903 and remained in Paris through World War II. Benstock dates her discussion 1900-1940. Moreover, my speculation is backgrounded by my conviction that Cather was homoerotic.

2. Other names even more apropos to my discussion could be added to the list. Mabel Dodge Luhan comes readily to mind. Luhan was a bisexual now more identified with Greenwich Village than Paris but who was attracted to Stein, and who escaped the oppressions of wealth (as did Stein to a lesser degree) and the strictures of Victorian Buffalo, New York. Luhan also may well have had more than passing social contact with Cather while both were in Taos, New Mexico.

3. Judith Fryer comments on the "divided self" as a motif common throughout Cather's fiction and one "developed with an interest, finally, not so much in reconciliation as in creating a new context in which the force, passion, and energy of the creative self can be preserved" (217).

4. In discussing cross-dressing such as Cather exhibited in adolescence, Shari Benstock echoes Freud's terminology:

"Although cross-dressing was an antisocial act that called attention to societal definitions of female homosexuals as 'inverts' and 'perverts,' it nonetheless was not a sign of liberation from heterosexual norms or patriarchal domination" (181). Freud uses the terms "inverted" or "perverted" to define homoerotic individuals, a subject which he discusses at length in his 1905 study *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (BW 551f).

5. "Viragint" was the term coined to define "inverted" women. A derogatory coinage, it did not imply a recognition of female homoeroticism but only that certain types of misbehaving women were deformed males. (See Haller 77f.)

6. Shari Benstock recognizes that Cather considered novel writing "a male activity" (12) and Woodress comments that readers of Cather's early writings would have been hard pressed to detect that she was a woman, her male persona was so pronounced (110). Somewhat ironically, physicians warned against young women reading novels, claiming the practice was one of the leading causes of "uterine disease in young women" (Haller 103).

7. The various ironies and unconscious, psychosexual motivations which could be attached to Stein's stubborn refusal to complete a course in obstetrics (which she easily could have passed) are in themselves intriguing.

8. See Elizabeth Ammons' "The Engineer as Cultural Hero and Willa Cather's First Novel, *Alexander's Bridge*," *American Quarterly*, 38 (5) Winter 1986, 746-760, for a consideration of Bartley Alexander as a "hero."

9. The Hallers point out, for instance, that "by the 1870s, purity authors . . . extolled frigidity in the female 'as a virtue to be cultivated, and sexual coldness as a condition to be desired'" (100). Women were encouraged to use sexual passivity to "restrain the aggressive nature of the male" (101). Any woman, such as Marian Forrester, who found pleasure in her sexuality was indeed a "lost lady." In fact, Cather develops a very strong "prostitute" motif relative to Marian Forrester.

10. Woodress, for one, documents Cather's courage — her leaving Red Cloud for Pittsburgh at age 22 (112) and her eagerness to explore the dangerous cliffs of the Arizona canyons (8), for example.

11. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* comes to mind here. In it Frederic Henry refers to some undefined "they" who waits to punish or even kill if one is caught off base while breaking the rules — especially the rules of correct sexual conduct as defined by Victorian mores. In passing, it is also noteworthy that Hemingway's own sexual-identity conflicts are coming under scrutiny. (See, for example, Mark Spilka's *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny*, Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989.)

12. I discuss Cather's ironic use of the women in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in "Women and the Father: Psychosexual Ambiguity in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," *American Imago*, 46 (Spring 1989), 61-76.

13. I discuss "caves," for instance in the above article and note other "imprisonment" motifs in "The Art of Conflict: Willa Cather's Last Three Novels," *South Central Review*, 8 (Winter 1991), 41-58.

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Tradition and the Woman Artist: James's *The Tragic Muse* and Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

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In an early review, Willa Cather paid tribute to James's novel *The Tragic Muse* (1890), praising it as the "only theatrical novel that has a particle of the real spirit of the stage in it." Of particular interest is her description of James's actress, Miriam Rooth: "the girl, the aspirant, the tragic muse who beats and beats upon those brazen doors that guard the unapproachable until one fine morning she beats them down and comes into her kingdom, the kingdom of unborn beauty that is to live through her" (*World and Parish* 288-89).[1] The similarity of this figure to Thea Kronborg, the protagonist of *The Song of the Lark* (1915), is so marked, one could argue that Miriam Rooth was a model for Cather's Wagnerian soprano. Each is identified with divine creative power: Miriam as the incarnation of Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy; Thea, whose name in Greek means *goddess.* Both young women, initially rough and untrained, possessed of extraordinary energy and unquenchable desire, devote themselves single-mindedly to their art and achieve the highest success, untainted by sordid ambition. Both rise to the heights — Miriam on the London stage, Thea at the Metropolitan Opera in New York — but both remain uncorrupted by the rivalries and intrigues of these intensely competitive worlds.

Thomas Eakins, *The Concert Singer*
(The Philadelphia Museum of Art)

In each novel, the woman's consummate art is revealed through the impressions of male characters who observe her after the lapse of months or years and marvel at the growth of her powers. Each novel ends as the heroine reaches her prime, starring in a performance described in superlative terms. As Juliet, Miriam is "an exquisite image of young passion and young despair, expressed in the truest divinest music that had ever poured from tragic lips" (2, 430). As Sieglinde, Thea likewise incarnates the beauty of the figure she represents: "Into one lovely attitude after another the music swept her, love impelled her. And the voice gave out all that was best in it" (475). Both heroines fulfill the prophecy of Miriam, that she will become a "new and vivifying force" in her chosen world (2, 119).

Thea and Miriam are blessed with extraordinary physical beauty and a potent female sexuality essential to their artistic power to arouse in other characters stronger feelings than the other characters arouse in them. Although both are married to their art, in the life of each a prominent part is played by a male patron of the arts — diplomat Peter Sherringham in *The Tragic Muse*; businessman Fred Ottenburg in *The Song of the Lark*. Each man not only falls in love with the artist but advances her career by helping her secure engagements and serving as a discriminating critic of her speech and manner, thus assisting in the transformation of a clumsy awkward girl into a self-assured woman of commanding presence and author ity. Near the end of *The Tragic Muse* Miriam marries a fellow actor but the marriage is merely noted — only an episode, not the culmination of the actress's life The Epilogue of *The Song of the Lark* states that Thea marries Fred Ottenburg, but Cather dropped this explicit sentence in the 1932 revision of the novel.[2] After Thea sings the role of Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Ottenburg says of Wagner's heroine, "She's made to live with ideas and enthusiasms, not with a husband" (421). The same could be said of Miriam and Thea.

A significant difference with far-reaching implications is that James makes Miriam's female teacher, Madame Carré, a central figure in his novel whereas Cather portrays Thea receiving instruction only from male teachers, none capable of imparting to her the essence of a tradition such as Madame Carré in her day the foremost actress of the Théâtre Français, instills in Miriam. The point may seem insignificant given the profound differences in the circumstances of the two protagonists — Thea, the American, rooted in the Colorado town where her Swedish immigrant parents settled and reared their seven children; Miriam, the European, living a wandering rootless life with her mother in cheap hotels and rented rooms in London and Paris — but the absence in Thea's story of a character like Madame Carré shows how fundamentally Cather's idea of the artist and of her own mission as a novelist had come to differ from James's.

Throughout *The Tragic Muse*, James represents tradition as a vital force in the making of an artist. As Madame Carré modelled herself on her greatest predecessor, "straight from whose hands she had received her most celebrated parts" (1, 114), so Miriam turns to Madame Carré as *her* model and compels the French actress to give her lessons, which will become the foundation of her success on the English stage. At the beginning, Miriam's training consists of observing the most accomplished actresses of the French theater and imitating them. She makes Madame Carré recite to her passages of French poetry and drama and practices them, trying to reproduce her teacher's intonations and cadences. She goes repeatedly with Peter Sherringham to the Théâtre Français, described by James as "an ideal and exemplary world" where *traditions* is the "sovereign word" — traditions that have been "preserved, transmitted, respected, cherished, until at last they form the very atmosphere, the vital air, of the establishment" (*Scenic Art* 72). There Miriam watches "each movement of each actor, attending to the way each thing was said or done as if it were the most important thing" (1, 217).

In a climactic scene, Miriam and Peter pass through the corridors of the foyer, filled with portraits — "the records of a splendid history" (1, 354), where Miriam stands before Gérôme's portrait of the actress Rachel (Élisabeth Félix) as the Muse of Tragedy and exclaims, "I feel them here, all, the great artists I shall never see" (1, 355). She is then conducted by the leading actress,

Mademoiselle Voisin, to her dressing room, where Miriam receives a memorable impression "of style, of refinement, of the long continuity of a tradition" (1, 368).[3] One of Miriam's admirers declares that she will be the "English Rachel" (1, 346), an association James reinforced by emphasizing the Jewish heritage of his heroine, destined like the actress known as Rachel to revitalize the stage in her performances of the great tragic roles. James placed Miriam within yet another tradition in the scenes where she sits for her portrait to Sherringham's cousin, Nick Dormer. Adeline Tintner has noted the resemblance of Nick's first painting of Miriam to Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse (*Museum World* 87). When Nick proposes to make many portraits of his beautiful model, Miriam declares herself happy to be painted "as often as Romney had painted the celebrated Lady Hamilton" (2, 306). Basil Dashwood, Miriam's husband and manager, proposes to place the portraits in "the vestibule of the theatre" (2, 387) where Miriam performs, just as Gérôme's portrait of Rachel hangs in the foyer of the Théâtre Français to commemorate the French actress.

In *The Song of the Lark*, the connections between the fictional artist and actual persons can be more fully documented than those in *The Tragic Muse* and replace James's overt emphasis on legendary personages in the arts. As has often been noted, Thea Kronborg's early life in many ways resembles that of Cather herself and of the Swedish-born singer Olive Fremstad, whom Cather considered the greatest Wagnerian soprano of the Metropolitan Opera during its golden age before the First World War. Given Cather's friendship with Fremstad, whose pleasure in the novel delighted its author, it is surprising that Cather portrayed no woman artist to inspire Thea as Madame Carré inspires Miriam. Cather did write several chapters depicting Thea's years in Germany, where Thea, like Fremstad, would study with the celebrated singer and teacher, Lilli Lehmann, but Cather deleted the section before sending the manuscript to her editor at Houghton Mifflin. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield she explained that she dropped the German chapters because they were so different in tone and language from the preceding parts.[4] Undoubtedly the novel gained in unity by the excision of the German chapters, although one would welcome a scene in which Cather's proud and stubborn heroine encounters a redoubtable teacher like Lilli Lehmann, whom Cather described as "the most exacting teacher in the world" ("Three American Singers" 38).[5] But Thea's reference to "my going to Lehmann, if she'll take me" (376) is all we are told of Thea's training in Germany. Thea never mentions Lehmann again, so we do not know whether she knew or even heard Wagner's favorite singer of his theater in Bayreuth. In Thea's rooms in New York there are no inscribed photographs of Lehmann (or of anyone else) such as Cather saw in the apartment of Lehmann's pupil, Geraldine Farrar ("Three American Singers" 38).

Wittingly or not, Cather separated Thea not only from Lilli Lehmann, "that powerful repository of tradition" ("Three American Singers" 38), but from all figures who might represent that tradition to Thea. Not only is Thea limited to male teachers, she is never portrayed in the presence of any female artist she can admire or want to emulate. She is introduced to no singers of whom she could say, as Miriam says of Mademoiselle Voisin, "I want to be what *she* is" (1, 370). Thea never mentions Bayreuth; she is never even depicted in an opera audience. In Chicago, she could have heard the Metropolitan Opera as Cather did; she could have gone to Sunday opera concerts at the Art Institute, where she spends hours looking at the casts and the paintings; she could have heard Fremstad singing Isolde and Brünnhilde with the Chicago Opera. She is never shown listening to a great singer, as Miriam listens in rapture to the actors of the Théâtre Francais. Instead, her musical awakening occurs at a symphony concert. The only professional female singers with whom we see Thea are the second-rate pupils of her vocal teacher in Chicago, women whose mannerisms and conceit filled Thea with disgust and contempt.

No artist appears eager to welcome Thea as her successor, as Madame Carré desires Miriam to succeed her as another Rachel on the Paris stage. The one female singer at the Metropolitan who is said to have befriended Thea in Germany becomes her enemy as soon as she feels threatened by Thea's success. Unlike Miriam, Thea shows no desire to model herself on anyone, to be the American Lehmann or anyone's successor. When she speaks of the roles she will sing, she expresses her determination to depart from tradition, to create a new character. No singer, she declares, has ever fully revealed the beauty of Sieglinde: "It never is sung right, and never will be" (453). (Thea's performance, however, will disprove the second half of her statement.) When assigned the part of Fricka in *Das Rheingold*, considered an "ungrateful" role, she vows to transform the scolding jealous wife of tradition into a wise and beautiful woman and succeeds brilliantly.[6]

More pervasively than *The Tragic Muse*, Cather's novel evokes the sense of effort and struggle against adversity demanded of the aspiring naturally gifted artist. Unlike Miriam's voice, capable only of "rude monotony" (1, 127) until it has been trained, the power and beauty of Thea's singing voice seems inborn, *there* from the beginning. The difference is apparent in the scenes in which each heroine's voice is first heard and judged by a great artist. At their first meeting, after Miriam has ranted and wailed her way through French and English poetry, Madame Carré in honest kindness can only say, "I think you've a voice, *ma fille*, somewhere or other. We must try and put our hand on it" (1, 127). To Sherringham's question, "Is there anything in my young friend?" she replies, "Nothing I can see. She's loud and coarse" (1, 133). When Thea first sings for her piano teacher Harsanyi, he hears a

voice rich and full, whose extraordinary quality he recognizes at once. Her voice is not an instrument to be trained but a faculty waiting to be discovered. She sings instinctively, "from the bottom of herself," her throat relaxed; the upper tones are produced like the lower, "as unconsciously, only with deeper breath" (188). To Harsanyi, the voice seems to exist apart from her volition, "like a wild bird that had flown into his studio on Middleton Street from goodness knew how far!" (187).

To suggest the perfection of Miriam's art, James compares her to works of art and other artists. She controls her voice as a great violinist controls his instrument. She herself is a "finished statue lifted from the ground to its pedestal" (1, 335). In contrast, Cather expresses the power of Thea's voice in natural images — the wild bird beating its "passionate wings" in her throat (187), a "river of silver sound" that fills the Metropolitan Opera House (412). As Fricka she has "a shining beauty like the light of sunset on distant sails" (447). When singing Sieglinde she "felt like a tree bursting into bloom" (478).

Cather did not minimize the importance of training and technique or consider discipline and perseverance any less important than James did. But she portrays Thea as creating a new art, drawing her inspiration not from the example of other professional artists but from sources far from theaters and opera houses. Appropriately, the composition that stirs her most deeply at the one concert she attends is Dvorak's Symphony "From the New World" — music that floods her mind with images of her own past, enabling her on her return to the desert country of her birth to hear "a new song . . . which had never been sung in the world before" (220). The only singers shown to give Thea pleasure are the Mexicans living on the outskirts of Moonstone. Her spiritual birth as an artist occurs in the solitude of Panther Canyon in the Southwest, where shards of the pottery made centuries ago by the anonymous Ancient People reveal to her the nature of all art: "an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself" (304). Years later, after her return from Germany, she identifies the sources of her art in her memories of the people and places of her childhood. "They save me: the old things . . . they are in everything I do" (460).

Both Miriam and Thea acknowledge debts to the greatest artists with whom they study. Near the end of *The Tragic Muse* Miriam pays tribute to her predecessor and teacher: "Every hour I live I see that the wisdom of the ages was in the experience of dear old Madame Carré — was in a hundred things she told me" (2, 309). In Harsanyi, Thea recognizes her spiritual guide, whose words she recalls long after her study with him; but, unlike Miriam, Thea stands apart, the protégé of no woman artist. She is a unique figure in the novel, presented as the first artist to infuse her Wagnerian roles with the spirit of the New World, in effect, to create "a new song . . . which had never been sung in the world before."

In creating in Thea an artist inspired not by European tradition but by the landscape and art of her own country, Cather dramatized within her fiction the purpose that inspired *O Pioneers!* and identified herself with her American contemporaries who were exhorting artists to resist domination by European writers and painters, to turn from the imitation of foreign models and to find their subjects and sources of inspiration in their native land. *The Song of the Lark* can be read as a declaration of artistic independence, no less than John Macy's celebration of America as a writer's "virgin land" — soil "that has scarcely been scratched" (15); or Sherwood Anderson's plea for "faith in our people and in the story of our people" (437); or Robert Herrick's call to writers to relinquish "the patterns of other countries" and "turn our faces towards the unique, rich field of our opportunity" (231).

In her article on Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, and Olive Fremstad, Cather paid tribute to the "supremely individual success" of each of the three singers, whose careers "make one of the most interesting stories in the history of American achievement" ("Three American Singers" 33). By allowing no other characters in *The Song of the Lark* to share the operatic spotlight with Thea, Cather made Thea's a "supremely individual success" in a twofold sense: although aided financially by other characters at critical points, Thea draws her ideas from within herself, not from the example of others, and the artist she becomes is like no one else. One may read in *The Song of the Lark* a personal declaration of independence: Cather's assertion of her own freedom from the power of the novelist who exerted the strongest influence on her early work. In creating an artist who in important ways resembles James's artist heroine but who claims no predecessor and owes primary allegiance to New World tradition, Cather paid the tribute that separated her from the master and expressed as her own the aspirations of her most transcendent character.

NOTES

1. The review appeared in the *Nebraska State Journal*, March 29, 1896, p. 9. Cather again praised James's novel in *The Courier*, April 16, 1898: "Of all the novels in the world stage novels are usually the most trashy and flatly unnatural and impossible, at least American and English novels, Henry James' magnificent Tragic Muse of course excepted" (*World and Parish* 550).

2. See Robin Heyeck and James Woodress, "Willa Cather's Cuts and Revisions in *The Song of the Lark*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (Winter 1979-1980): 651-658.

3. Adeline R. Tintner, who has written most fully on the importance of Gérôme's portrait, identifies it and the interview with Mademoiselle Voison as the two influences which compel Miriam in the scene to choose the stage over marriage to Peter Sherringham ("Miriam as the English Rachel," 187).

4. Letter of March 15, 1916, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

5. Cather's judgments of Lehmann, whom she heard in Pittsburgh, are somewhat contradictory. In her review of *Lohengrin* given by the Damrosch Opera Company, she wrote of Lehmann: "she has gone off sadly in voice, they tell me, though her acting is as superb as ever" (*Nebraska State Journal*, March 14, 1896, in *World and Parish* 404). This review foreshadows Ottenburg's judgment of Necker in *The Song of the Lark*: "she's failing so. The last time I heard her she had no voice at all," to which Thea responds, "She's a great artist, whether she's in voice or not, and she's the only one here" (433). In a review of a Met production of *Die Walküre*, Cather harshly criticized Lehmann's performance as Sieglinde: "her voice is worn out, her methods are antiquated, and her self-conscious, declamatory German style seems very artificial and stilted beside the more natural methods of the younger singers" (*The Courier*, June 17, 1899 in *World and Parish* 623).

6. In "Three American Singers," Cather noted approvingly the departures from tradition made by each of her subjects. She praised Fremstad for creating Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* as a youthful figure — a "wholly original conception" — instead of reproducing the "oppressively mature" figure of tradition (47). She approved Farrar's singing "against tradition" by making dramatic characters of such figures as Violetta, Marguerite, and Juliet, traditionally regarded simply as "vehicles for the coloratura" (39). She considered Louise Homer superior to her European predecessors in her singing of Brangäne in *Tristan and Isolde*: "She has certainly improved upon the German tradition. Her Brangäne is less wild and violent, more gentle and sympathetic, than that of the German contraltos who have sung the part here" (35).

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My Mortal Enemy: Willa Cather's Ballad of Exile

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At the end of *The Professor's House*, Godfrey St. Peter consciously lets go of his family ties. He intends to live suspended from the demands of relational life — "outward bound" as his family comes home. He creates a place for himself that is much like Tom Outland's mesa: separated from contemporary human interaction, or involved in it only in a generalized way — to "a world full of Augustas" (*PH* 281). In her next novel, Cather explores the darkest results of the step to break away from family connection. If *The Professor's House* is about how to live in self-imposed emotional exile, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* are about how to live in fruitful exile, *My Mortal Enemy* is about how to die in exile. While many of Cather's fictions include the experience of exile, in no other novel is this condition presented more starkly than in *My Mortal Enemy*. In a conversation with Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, Carl Linstrum says, "there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years" (*OP* 119). While Carl's statement represents a foreshadowing of the brutal violence which will befall Marie and Emil (a violence that springs predictably from intense passion) and a look forward to the title of Cather's next novel, Carl could certainly be speaking of the story of exile which suffuses Cather's fiction. Myra Henshawe experiences several difficult exiles in her passionate life, yet it is interesting to note that in *My Mortal Enemy* Cather characteristically reverses the thematic line of *The Professor's House*: the later novel begins with a picture of Myra *returning* to Parthia after years of self-imposed exile.

Cather is after the anatomy of exile in *My Mortal Enemy*, and, as in the ballad form, every detail contributes to that effect. While James Woodress acknowledges the darkness inherent in this briefest and most intense of Cather's works, he also acknowledges the novel's power: "It is a complete entity and an almost perfect work of art" (*WCALL* 379). In "Miss Jewett," Cather describes the quality she herself achieved in this novel:

> Walter Pater said that every truly great drama must, in the end, linger in the reader's mind as a sort of ballad. One might say that every fine story must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality which one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience a memory or a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden. (*NUF* 78-79)

My Mortal Enemy represents the bitter essence of the issues of exile Cather worked on all of her life. In his introduction to the novel, Marcus Klein reminds us of Cather's adolescent friendships: "Her companions in the village were the old men and women, anyone whose real life had been elsewhere" (*MME* viii). Cather's early encounters with her immigrant neighbors in Red Cloud immersed her in the paradigm of exile and gave her the themes she would continue to work out in *My Mortal Enemy* and other novels. Her later experiences of returning to Red Cloud as an adult and a successful novelist might have contributed to the *form* Cather chose for this novel. In the twenties, when Cather was visiting home, she tried to restore the simple life she had enjoyed with her family. She did not visit outside the Cather family home, and she spent many peaceful hours with her parents: "In the evenings her family usually listened to Victrola records, which Cather had sent from New York, some of them made by her operatic friends Fremstad and Farrar. Her parents, however, preferred songs of their native South, spirituals, and popular nineteenth-century ballads" (*WCALL* 390).

During a time when I was thinking seriously about *My Mortal Enemy*, a friend came to my house to practice some English folk ballads before she had to perform them in public. As she played the guitar and sang moving versions of "Barbara Allan" and "The Unquiet Grave," I realized how Cather's novel embodies the haunting (almost eerie), bittersweet, mournful, and passionate attitude toward human longing and love present in the songs I was listening to. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather presents a complex narrative of love and loss whose haunting resonances become increasingly suggestive. The novel contains moments of intense longing and passion which correspond to the stanzas of a popular ballad.

In *The Ballad Tradition*, Gordon Hall Gerould defines the ballad form:

> The Ballad . . . wherever we find it, is concentrated; the action is so massed that we do not get the effect of a skeletonized long story, but of a unified short story, complete in itself, not infrequently implying events before and after but always fairly well centred on a single main event. (86)

The main event in *My Mortal Enemy* is the banishment of Myra Driscoll into permanent exile; this is the moment which determines all subsequent action in the novel. Of course, this is not the first event we hear of. Cather chooses to begin her novel years later, during Myra's return from banishment. In our first look at her, Myra is "seated upon the sofa and softly playing on Cousin Bert's guitar" (5). As Archbishop Latour represents both Jesus suffering the stations of the cross and also the faithful Christian emulating the ritual practice, so Myra is both the subject of the ballad and the balladier. In a letter, Cather explains that in this novel "she was painting a portrait of Myra with reflections of her in various looking glasses" (*WCALL* 384). With this description of her technique, Cather places herself firmly in the modernist tradition.[1] As in a Cubist painting, different forms (or geometrical shapes in a painting) must be reconstructed by the viewer to create a human figure. The reader of *My Mortal Enemy* must piece together an acceptable Myra from the various shards.

Francis B. Gummere describes the basis of ballad: "The point is that incremental repetition is the fundamental fact of ballad structure" (125). Just as the conventional ballad form provides key refrains which set and reinforce mood, tone, and theme, so *My Mortal Enemy* presents no less than ten key physical and emotional experiences of exile. Every major character — Myra, Oswald, Nellie, John Driscoll — must undergo at least one significant exile. Each must learn to live banished from a beloved place. A simple list of the experiences of exile in the novel suggests the division of the story into episodes equivalent to stanzas in popular ballads. Cather creates a world of bitter people who must learn to live and die alone.

Myra Driscoll Henshawe is an orphan who recreates that pattern in her adult life. She is an involuntary orphan as a child and then an orphan by choice when she abandons her uncle's house. John Driscoll himself leaves Parthia as a young man in order to make "his fortune employing contract labour in the Missouri swamps" (*MME* 11-12). He then returns to display his wealth to his kinsmen. Oswald Henshawe exiles himself from Parthia to New York long enough to make enough money to marry Myra. Even though Oswald is the literal exile, Myra feels banished from his presence and affection. She recounts her feelings of isolation to Nellie many years later: "I've not forgotten; those hot southern Illinois nights, when Oswald was in New York, and I had no word from him except through Liddy, and I used to lie on the floor all night and listen to the express trains go by" (*MME* 87). This image of the deserted lover longing for an absent beloved is a standard ballad subject, clearly seen in "Scarborough Fair" and "Lord Lovel." Passionate longing for the absent lover is particularly evident in the sixth stanza of the folk ballad "The Seeds of Love":

> The willow tree will twist,
> And the willow tree will twine;
> I oftentimes have wished I were in that young man's arms
> That once had the heart of mine. (272)

Myra's sexual and emotional frustration leads her to choose deliberate separation from her uncle's affection and his fortune.

Cather provides the exiled Myra with a mirror image in Nellie Birdseye, who must also experience first an exile from the Henshawe apartment in New York, then a literal exile to a "sprawling, overgrown West-coast city" (*MME* 57), where she finds Oswald and Myra. She is also an emotional exile from the immature, romantic conception of the Henshawe elopement she had harbored as an adolescent. During her final illness, Myra bolts her door on Nellie in a self-imposed exile from the intrusive presence of this reflection of

her own romantic youth. Like the religious women who now reside at her uncle's home, which has been converted into a convent, during her sickness Myra is, as Oswald says to Nellie, in self-imposed "retreat" (*MME* 79). Just as she had run away with Oswald in order to marry, so now in her mortal malaise, she secretly leaves her home in order to elope with death. Myra makes a sacrament of her voluntary exile to the cliff where she seeks meaning. She is interested in what theologian Sandra Schneiders calls "the sacramentality of place which is at one and the same time earthy and material yet transcendent of matter" (Lane xi).

My Mortal Enemy, Cather's bitterest vision of human relationships, presents an orphan who longs for love but dies as she has lived, in exile and fundamentally alone. Beneath Myra Henshawe's bitter laughter and sardonic humor lies a desire for connection. She, like Bartley Alexander, believes she must restrict herself to only one relationship, that she must choose between her uncle, who represents financial security, and her lover Oswald, who provides admiration and passion; she must dwell, she believes, either in the Parthia mansion or the New York apartment. Perhaps nowhere in Cather's *oeuvre* are place and self more painfully and beautifully linked. Place, indeed, becomes its own balladic refrain. Cather's words in praise of Tolstoi's fiction could serve to describe her own use of the details of place, that Tolstoi's interiors "are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author's mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves" (*OW* 39-49). Of all Cather's heroines, Myra Henshawe is most fully defined by the interiors she calls her own. In Nellie's first glimpse of Myra's New York apartment, Cather sexualizes the environment and encodes Myra's desire: "The long heavy velvet curtains and the velvet chairs were a wonderful plum-colour, like ripe fruit. The curtains were lined with that rich cream-colour that lies under the blue skin of ripe figs" (*MME* 26-27).

Myra attempts always to exert control over her environments. When angry at life's bitter realities, she poisons the space she inhabits, yet she is capable of transforming her domestic spaces into warm, inviting or evil, dangerous locations. After the Henshawes' argument about the mysterious key, when she hears the bitter words Myra speaks to Oswald, Nellie thinks, "I was afraid to look or speak or move. Everything about me seemed evil. When kindness has left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them. When it has left a place where we always found it, it is like shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless" (*MME* 51). The presence of anger in the once-enchanted apartment on Madison Square changes the complexion of the entire environment. After the argument, Myra again behaves as she always does when threatened: she exiles herself, this time from Oswald by traveling to visit friends in Pittsburgh.

Like Bartley Alexander, Myra refuses to live suspended between two places. She has burned her emotional bridges behind her. She can't go back; she won't go back. Her evaluation of her relationship with Oswald undermines the possibility of suspension between these beloved places. In his paraphrase of an unusual letter Cather wrote to an aspiring writer, James Woodress provides Cather's description of Myra: "It was the extravagance of her devotions that made her in the end feel that Oswald was her mortal enemy, that he had somehow been the enemy of her soul's peace. Her soul, of course, could never have been at peace. She wasn't that kind of woman" (*WCALL* 384-385). This passage is reminiscent of the refrain in *Alexander's Bridge*, "It's like the song; peace is where I am not" (*AB* 70-71). Because she can't live suspended between a beloved memory and her current reality, Myra tries to poison even Oswald's memories of youthful pleasure: "He's a sentimentalist, always was; he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and make himself believe it was all like that. It wasn't" (*MME* 88). She becomes angriest when Nellie suggests letting up on Oswald. Myra is, in many ways, her uncle's niece. Both Driscolls are able to find another's weakness and use it to inflict pain. John Driscoll uses Myra's pride against her, as Myra constantly reminds Oswald of his professional inadequacies.

While the church embraces the wicked John Driscoll, he leaves a stipulation in his will that Myra is to be received into the home he endows for destitute women in Chicago, and that she is to be "kept without charge and paid an allowance of ten dollars a week for pocket money until the time of her death" (*MME* 81). John Driscoll foresees his postmortem triumph and revenge for her disobedience. Once poor, Myra is therefore in the worst kind of situation Cather can imagine. She "can't take the road at all" (65). If the road is all (as Cather firmly indicates in "Old Mrs. Harris" when Mr. Rosen quotes Michelet to Vickie Templeton: "*Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout*" [*OD* 158]), Myra's immobility is truly terrible. Cather defined Oswald as the mortal enemy: "At the time the book came out, she wrote her old friend George Seibel: 'I had a premonition you would understand [that it was Oswald] — and that most people wouldn't'" (*WCALL* 384). However, for me, Myra's mortal enemy is her compulsion to choose between places, but that she must decide between economic security and romantic love is insupportable to her. Because she has chosen Oswald, she has had to forsake the Driscoll fortune and, in her own mind, the church she associates with Driscoll. At her death, Myra is alone with the need for choice and alone with the choices she has made.

All the major characters in the novel look for places unpolluted by bitter memories. Oswald exiles himself to

Alaska, where he scatters Myra's ashes, finally adopting Myra's spatial method of managing pain. While Myra had been most interested in creating a "place in the world" (*MME* 75) for herself, the novel's resolution pictures her eternally displaced or exiled from all she has known. In Cather's darkest vision of human choice, she gives Myra the answer for the restless exile, who must always search for the inviolate place. Myra says to Father Fay, "Religion is different from everything else; *because in religion seeking is finding*" (*MME* 94). James Woodress describes the discovery of this answer as belonging "to the same dark mood that possessed Cather as she and her professor worked themselves through their mid-life crises. It is the most bitter piece of fiction she ever wrote, the most tragic, and it drained the last bit of gall from her system" (*WCALL* 380).

Woodress also suggests that in *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather "reinforces meaning with allusion . . . . By the use of allusion Cather is able to convey meaning to the reader that Nellie can't transmit" (*WCALL* 387). Cather enriches this first-person narrative with powerful reference to a compendium of ballad themes: lost loves, lost havens, unfulfilled longing, mistaken choices, fatal illness, and untimely death. Willa Cather's ballad of exile — her most pessimistic artistic vision — describes death in exile and sets the stage for her next two novels, in which pilgrims must come to terms, like Myra, with the dilemma of exile. But *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* describe characters who seek and find ways to learn to live in exile, an optimism hard-won through Myra's tragic ballad.

NOTE

1. For an extended consideration of the modernist qualities in Cather's fiction, see Jo Ann Middleton's *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique.* London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990.

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The Internal Gaze: "Coming, Aphrodite!" and the Panopticon

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Thomas Eakins, *Sketch for William Rush and His Model*
(The Philadelphia Museum of Art)

In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault describes the prison Jeremy Bentham devised at the end of the eighteenth century and called the Panopticon. The principle behind this series of structures is to discipline prisoners using only the gaze of the guards. Its design is simple: an outer ring of individual cells surrounds a central tower. Each of these cells has two windows, one exposing the cell to the central tower, and one to the outside of the ring which allows light to shine through the cell. The guards can then watch the "captive silhouettes" in each cell around the ring. In this situation, a prisoner can move nowhere and do nothing without knowing that the guards can see him. Furthermore, because the central tower has a maze of zig-zagging halls which refract light, the prisoner cannot tell when the guards are watching and when they are not. Since the prisoner can never tell when he is watched, he must constantly assume the guards gaze upon him. As a result of this panoptic gaze, the

prisoner internalizes the gaze and becomes his own guard. The principle, therefore, works even when there is no guard.

In Willa Cather's short story "Coming, Aphrodite!", one can see the same principles at work in the way society watches and controls women. Eden Bower internalizes a male gaze which she uses to measure her patriarchally-defined beauty and femininity, as well as her success as a woman and a performer. Her life seems acceptable, indeed even enjoyable and powerful, until Cather undercuts her success with a description of Eden after many years of internalizing and living continuously under the gaze.

The principle that Foucault describes transfers immediately to institutions such as prisons, factories, and schools, but, as Sandra Lee Bartky points out in "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," it does not take into consideration "the extent to which discipline can be institutionally *unbound* as well as institutionally bound" (75). By applying the principles of the Panopticon to women's oppression, what Bartky calls an institutionally unbound oppression, we begin to realize that a woman is constantly looked upon and judged by society according to her appearance. For this reason, many women undertake a rigid beauty routine which takes discipline to execute each painstaking step.

Women develop their ideas of female beauty, as well as the efforts required to produce and maintain this beauty, from older women who teach them how to be feminine, and through agents of popular culture — magazine and newspaper advertisements, literature. This image of beauty can enslave women, as Bartky writes:

> [Women can] become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that *she* is under surveillance in ways that he is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite. (81)

Just as the self-policed prisoner who internalizes correct behavior, a woman can internalize a patriarchally-defined image of herself. By doing so she must constantly strive to be young, fair, and delicate — the image of Aphrodite — in order to feel good about herself. She carries with her the knowledge of the panoptic male gaze, by which both men and women judge her, and she polices herself continually to be sure she lives up to imposed measures of beauty.

Since the way women feel about themselves can have a direct relationship with their appearance, they may perpetuate the image they have internalized, but that trivializes their very being. Again, as Bartky writes:

> Whatever its ultimate effect, discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity. There is a certain contradiction here. While its imposition may promote a larger disempowerment, discipline may bring with it a certain development of a person's powers. Women, then, like other skilled individuals, have a stake in the perpetuation of their skills, whatever it may have cost to acquire them and quite apart from the question whether, as a gender, they would have been better off had they never had to acquire them in the first place. (77)

Whatever judgment we may pass on women's grooming habits, we must realize that a woman's beauty skills and knowledge help her feel her femininity as patriarchal society defines it. The male gaze, or the attention she gets as a "reward" for her efforts, can increase the woman's sense of both her feminine self and her self-worth.

Cather's Eden Bower has mastered the art of femininity and invites attention. Like other women, Eden knows how to be feminine, and she believes that her femininity, which will make her "much admired by men," will get her "everything she [wants]" (29). By a very young age she had chosen a career which would ensure that men would always gaze upon her, for she wanted then, and throughout the story, nothing more than "to be admired and adored" (40).

As Cather portrays her, this diva-to-be has internalized the male gaze and obviously enjoys having men watch her. Since her idea of success is to have people admire and adore her, she must conform to the male standards of beauty, and she must forever carry with her the realization that men look at her and judge her, not necessarily by her talent, but by the way she looks. For example, as two young men leave her apartment, one says to the other, "Don't you think she has a beautiful talent?" (23), to which the reply is, "She has a beautiful figure" (23). Yet Eden takes pride in this type of praise. Her whole sense of herself, and her self-worth, indeed her very idea of success, is tied to men's attention to her beauty.

The satisfaction that Eden gets out of her femininity gives her a certain power. It is this power that frightens her neighbor Don Hedger, whose name may suggest his ambivalence about her and her values. In one instance Eden confronts Hedger about washing his dog in the bathtub. After this encounter Hedger is "gnawed by a spiteful desire to get back at her" (16). Yet it is not her words which seem to unsettle him, but rather her beauty: "Hedger was badly frightened. She was so tall and positive, and was fairly blazing with beauty and anger" (14). Cather juxtaposes Hedger's fear with a description of Eden's beauty, forcing the reader to realize the source of his distress.

Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, helps one to understand some of Hedger's actions as he works to overcome this fear of Eden. Kristeva writes, "To varying degrees . . . genital fear can be kept within bounds by idealization as well as by the unleashing of partial drives (sado-masochistic, voyeuristic-exhibitionist, oral-anal)" (162). The "partial drive" of voyeurism helps Hedger to manage his fear, as, perhaps reflexively, he conquers Eden with his gaze. Voyeuristically gazing at her naked calisthenics,

Hedger idealizes his neighbor by turning her into a "pure form" of art (Kristeva 166), an object that is not really a woman at all. As an art form, she is under his control for he creates her. Cather describes the action:

> As she swung her arms and changed from one pivot of motion to another, muscular energy seemed to flow through her from her toes to her finger-tips. The soft flush of exercise and the gold of afternoon sun played over her flesh together, enveloped her in a luminous mist which, as she turned and twisted, made now an arm, now a shoulder, now a thigh, dissolve in pure light and instantly recover its outline with the next gesture. (17)

As he watches, Hedger uses his gaze to break down Eden's body into separate parts, erasing her as a whole being, and then mentally drawing her the way he would like to see her in a "single running line" (18). He has effectively ignored those parts of the woman's body which make him uncomfortable and reconceived her without them (Robertson 491). She becomes his muse. He only thinks of Eden as "a bold body, studying itself quite coolly and evidently pleased with itself" (20). She is an object for him to watch and appropriate into himself, stripped of her own subjectivity.

Cather brings this dynamic into the public arena as she shows that, like Hedger, the men and women watching Eden go up in the balloon on Coney Island objectify her with their gaze. For example, when Eden steps out on to the platform to perform the balloon act, at least one man knows it is acceptable to call out to a woman, "You're a peach, girlie!" (37). Eden bows to acknowledge such a compliment. We also see that it is not only the men who objectify women. Since women have internalized the gaze in order to evaluate themselves, they also turn it "objectively" on other women. For example, it is the older women looking at Hedger's model, Molly Welch, descending through the air after her balloon act, who notice and comment on Molly's figure: "Beautiful legs, she has" (36). Then, when Eden goes up to do the balloon act, it is Molly who mentions how well the black tights show off Eden's legs, and what a beautiful line she makes along her back. These observers break women down into parts, just as Hedger did when he watched Eden through the knot hole, and fail to see the whole woman.

After the Coney Island afternoon, Hedger feels a need to possess and reshape Eden more completely. She complies with his desire. He notices, "She had seemed like clay in his hands ever since they got on the boat to come home" (42). He takes advantage of Eden's desire to please him, a man, and tells her a brutal story of a Rain Queen killed by her jealous husband after he discovered her with one of her lovers. Eden realizes that Hedger is not trying to "please her" but to "antagonize her" (46) with this story. It is his eyes, his gaze, that mock her. Eden knows that "nobody's eyes had ever defied her like this. They were searching her and seeing everything" (46). This is not admiration nor adoration; this is psychological rape, the desire to control a woman's sexuality. It has nothing to do with anger or revenge — it has everything to do with power. Like the guard in the Panopticon, Hedger watches and controls Eden with his eyes. In doing so, however, he himself becomes trapped in an eternal power struggle to control Woman, the frightening Other.

A question remains, however, as to why Eden allowed a sexual relationship to begin between Hedger and herself after he had violated her through his brutal Aztec story. The answer may lie in Eden's thoughts later that same night. Alone in her apartment, she thinks to herself, "Crowds and balloons [are] all very well . . . but woman's chief adventure is man" (47). So Eden gets up and fights for herself, "as a blow rouses a proud man" (47), trying to conquer Man with her Femininity, not realizing that what she is fighting is a system bigger than either she or Hedger. This system foreordains her failure.

In this story Cather observes and relates the tale of timeless power struggle between men and women. In this struggle, Man gazes at Woman in order to keep her under his control. He judges her by her beauty and puts her up on a pedestal as a pure form. From this point he has complete subjectivity and she is the fractured object of his gaze, his muse. She understands this panoptic gaze and carries with her the knowledge that she is watched and judged. She internalizes this knowledge and learns the skills to give herself the only power she can gain in such a society — she makes herself beautiful for his eyes, regardless of the fact that society devalues the skills she must use to do so. Her efforts to make herself beautiful and conform to the image of femininity give her a sense of value and a definition of herself as feminine, even if the patriarchy has shaped this image of femininity. Masculinity trivializes Femininity; and femininity and beauty are something for men to stalk, conquer, and possess.

At first, Eden sets out to control Man with her Femininity, and when Cather leaves Hedger sitting alone in his apartment with Eden's evening gown and the knot hole plugged with Eden's note paper, it would appear that her Femininity has triumphed over the man who tried to conquer her. But Man has defined the image of that Femininity, and Cather undercuts Eden's supposed success in the next scene with the images of Eden Bower, eighteen years later, coming back to New York. She has hardened and lost the joy and hope she had in her younger years. In *Willa Cather's Short Fiction* Marilyn Arnold points out that Cather uses light imagery to highlight the losses which Eden has endured over the years (116). While the young Eden stands defiantly in the sunlight doing her exercises, the older Eden must "[blink] against the sun" (60). Arnold writes, "In our last view of Eden, her once splendidly mobile image is ossified by a grotesque and unnatural light" (117). Her face has gradually hardened

into a "plaster cast" which will only come alive when she is on stage, in front of the gaze.

Eden's career has taken its toll on her beauty. Living up to the panoptic gaze which appreciates only young, vibrant beauty in women, and thereby achieving success as she defined it, have hardened her and made her bitter. Meanwhile, Hedger's career has also been a success, but the reader suspects that his career has not had the same effect on him as Eden's has had on her. When she returns to New York and asks about Hedger, an art dealer tells her that Hedger is "one of the first men among the moderns . . . . He is always coming up with something different" (62). Hedger is "original, erratic, and . . . changing all the time" (62). Hedger is not under the panoptic gaze as Eden is — indeed, his career pushes him to *refine* this gaze. Eden's effort to win power and prestige by making people admire and adore her and therefore live under the gaze, however, ultimately conquers her.

It would be unfair to Cather to say that she wrote this story as a conscious feminist tirade against the male gaze, for that would ignore her emphatic critique on capitalist society which exists in this text simultaneously with these images of the male gaze and its effects on women. Still, Cather invites us to join her in this panoptic male gaze as, like Hedger, we too gaze panoptically according to societal precedents. Yet, we see the effects of this gaze in the portrait of Eden coming back into New York after many successful years as a singer, for this image undercuts Eden's early desire to invite attention. Living up to the expectations of the gaze which only admires and adores the image of Aphrodite destroys the defiant and careless young woman.

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Cather *Legacy*. The first issue of volume 9 of *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* is devoted to Willa Cather, featuring essays and notes on her work and contemporaries, reviews on recent Cather scholarship, and a bibliography. Available from WCPM at $9 plus $2 postage.

Painting "The Tricks That Shadows Play": Impressionism in *Lucy Gayheart*

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In 1902, Willa Cather travelled to Europe with Isabelle McClung and began, in "that happy part of the world called France," a love affair with the one country that forever would rival the Nebraska landscape of her childhood for her affections ("Barbizon" 125). While the trip to France may have led to Cather's discovery of another important spiritual landscape, it also brought her directly to the palpable facts of artistic traditions she had already come to know and value. Cather's essays of the European trip record her enthusiastic appreciation for the achievements in architecture, sculpture and painting at many of the stops along the itinerary — Chester Cathedral, Burne-Jones's London Studio, Pere-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, at Barbizon and Avignon. Cather's admiration for the romantic traditions and technique of Millet and the Barbizon painters is well known through her explicit references in the European essays and later in "The Novel Demeuble." In *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), however, she turned to a different artistic vocabulary — that of French Impressionism — to explore significant transformations in familiar themes. Through this visual mode, Cather sets up a dynamic context in which to explore again the fundamental questions of self, human relations, and the kingdom of art.

Lucy Gayheart *is* Impressionism. Throughout the novel, the contexts in which Lucy is most fully revealed as a vital force are filled with references to color, light, and motion. We learn early on, in a descriptive mode of light and color, of Lucy's seemingly continual, energetic walking around Haverford:

> . . . Lucy covered the distance a dozen times a day, covered it quickly with that walk so peculiarly her own, like an expression of irrepressible light-heartedness. When the old women caught sight of her in the distance, a mere white figure under the flickering shade of the early summer trees, they always knew her by the way she moved. On she came, past hedges and lilac bushes and woolly-green grape arbours and rows of jonquils, and one knew she was delighted with everything; with her summer clothes and the air and the sun and the blossoming world. There was something in her nature that was like her movements, something direct and unhesitating and joyous, and in her golden-brown eyes. They were not gentle brown eyes, but flashed with gold sparks like that Colorado stone we call the tiger-eye. Her skin was rather dark, and the colour in her lips and cheeks was like the red of dark peonies — deep, velvety. Her mouth was so warm and impulsive that every shadow of feeling made a change in it.
>
> Photographs of Lucy meant nothing to her old friends. It was her gaiety and grace they loved. Life seemed to lie very near the surface in her. She had

> that singular brightness of young beauty: flower gardens have it for the first few hours after sunrise. (4-5)

Lucy, a "mercurial, vacillating person," is defined by motion, somewhat elusive, like the light from which she takes her name (18). Her life is measured in motion, as when her old friend Mrs. Ramsay notes the changes in Lucy after Sebastian's death by observing that her "walk is tired" (164). The stable image of her — the photography — is meaningless. Lucy cannot be "captured" except by the painterly, artistic eye, aware of the high tonal contrast and spontaneity ascribed by Cather to the artistic temperament.

Cather does, of course, choose a stable image of Lucy, and it is ironically, unbearably stable — the "three, light footprints running away," captured in concrete outside her childhood home (231). Mundane, heavy and durable, the concrete slab is a fitting counterpoint to the light, dynamic and spontaneous Lucy. Compounding the irony is Cather's pointed reliance on a painterly, Impressionistic vocabulary in the elaboration of the image:

> After all these years the three footprints were still there in the sidewalk; the straight, slender foot of a girl of thirteen, delicately and clearly stamped in the grey-white composition. . . . They were *light*, in very low relief; *unless one were looking for them, one might not notice them at all*. . . . In summer the wild sunflowers grew up on either side of the walk and hung over it; tufts of alfalfa . . . encroached upon it, and a wild vetch . . . climbed the sunflower stalks, making a kind of wattle all along the two slabs marked by *those swift impressions*. For to Harry Gordon they did seem swift: the print of the toes was deeper than the heel; the heel was very faint, as if that part of the living foot had *just grazed the surface of the pavement*. Was there really some baffling suggestion of *quick motion in those impressions* . . . or was it merely because he had seen them made, that to him they always had a look of *swiftness, mischief, and lightness?* . . .
>
> Nothing else seemed to bring her back so vividly *into the living world for a moment*. Sometimes . . . *he caught for a flash the very feel of her*; an urge at his elbow, a breath on his cheek, *a sudden lightness and freshness* like a shower of spring raindrops. (226-27; emphasis added)

Color and light are the defining features of the description, superseding the linear articulation of shape and form. The visual intensity of juxtaposed light and color creates motion, which works to define the peculiar lasting effect Lucy has on people. In a manner of artistic narration pervasive in Cather's work, the image of Lucy is as real as the concrete and as elusive as memory. The visual dynamics move beyond the simple adaptation of technique for descriptive effect to become a more evocative force within the narrative.

That force is further apparent in *Lucy Gayheart*, in the relationship between Lucy and Harry Gordon, when Cather revisits once more the tensions which complicate and challenge the artistic life. This exploration of how the pursuit of art has altered these lives is very different from the pioneer-artist-hero vision of earlier works and may reveal a great deal about Cather toward the end of her career. Impressionism, with its light broken prismatically into fragments of component color, juxtaposed and scattered over the canvas, is a fitting articulation of her own world much changed.

Early in the novel, Lucy and Harry Gordon are ice-skating in what amounts to an Impressionist landscape, on a cold winter's afternoon, at "the end of the Christmas holiday, the Christmas of 1901." It is a happy time for Lucy, who has abandoned the preparations for her return to Chicago to join her friends for a skating party. The scene later earns greater significance once we realize that it foreshadows Lucy's death at the end of the novel, and as it provides an interesting example of the pictorial mode of Impressionism Cather uses throughout the novel; it also begins to explore Lucy's physical and emotional reactions to time running away:

> They sat down on a bleached cottonwood log, where the black willow thicket behind them made a screen. The interlacing twigs threw off red light like incandescent wires, and the snow underneath was rose-colour. Harry poured Lucy some whisky . . . . The round red sun was falling like a heavy weight; it touched the horizon line and sent quivering fans of red and gold over the wide country. For a moment Lucy and Harry Gordon were sitting in a stream of blinding light; it burned on their skates and on the flask and the metal cup. Their faces become so brilliant that they looked at each other and laughed. In an instant the light was gone; the frozen stream and the snow-masked prairie land became violet, under the blue-green sky. Wherever one looked there was nothing but flat country and low hills, all violet and grey. (10)

Time is marked by tonal color and light and time's inevitable passage by the dynamics of those two forces. Light reflects and illuminates; it defines an immediate and particular moment, which is further "contained" or foreshortened by the absence of a prospective view, a painterly technique that gives prominence to the foreground. Even the somewhat choppy rhythm of the passage contributes to the narrative recreation of the broken, prismatic style that marks Impressionism. The total emotional significance of the moment — the recognition of good times coming to an end — is registered in Lucy, who marks this setting of the sun, Cather tells us, with "a long sigh."

Lucy, as artist, draws emotion from the visual field, but overall, her artistic temperament, however well-developed, is very unlike that of her predecessors. She is far from the portrait of the artist that Thea Kronborg had been in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), more confused and challenged by the artistic career she wishes to follow and more drawn to the distracting human commitments of life. Art does not consume her life in the way it had Thea's. Lucy is more a realist, perhaps more like Ántonia, but without a Jim Burden. Harry Gordon seems to be some distant kin to Jim, but

he lacks Jim's integrating, artistic vision. Their relationship is a series of missteps throughout the novel, full of misunderstanding, confusion and lost opportunity. Harry Gordon's reaction to the Haverford sunset is not recorded in *Lucy Gayheart*, but one would never expect his to be an artistic sensibility. Indeed, it is not particularly surprising to discover later in the novel that Harry has trouble understanding the French Impressionist exhibit at the Art Institute in Chicago:

> When they reached a loan exhibit of French Impressionists he broke down, and began pointing out figures that were not correctly drawn.
>
> "Now, you'll admit, Lucy —" he would being persuasively.
>
> "Certainly I admit, but I don't think it matters. I don't know anything about pictures, but I think some are meant to represent objects, and others are meant to express a kind of feeling merely, and then accuracy doesn't matter."
>
> "But anatomy is a fact," he insisted, "and facts are at the bottom of everything."
>
> She did not answer him impatiently, as she would have done once, but bent her head a little and spoke in a quiet voice which disconcerted him. "Are they, Harry? I'm not so sure." (101)

Void of line and clear delineation of form, these paintings are void of meaning for Harry. He is much more at ease in the clearly defined world of banking than he is in Lucy's world of art. That world he takes only in short doses — a week of indulgent opera-going with Lucy each spring — and even with that, he admits to Lucy that music doesn't mean much to him without her, except to remind him of her (108). At the conclusion of his visit to Chicago, almost too predictably, Harry tells Lucy that it is "about time we got down to business" — the discussion of their marriage. His happiness is tied to Lucy, and he claims that all she wants is what he wants too. Harry cannot create a life; he seeks to live one through Lucy. He is fundamentally lacking vision, but apparently, if he can somehow get the facts of his own life and Lucy's straightened out, he feels he will be fulfilled. The trouble is, of course, that he understands Lucy's life about as well as he understands the Impressionists. At the novel's end, Harry is left with a very real piece of concrete, but for him, Lucy is no longer real: "She has receded to the far horizon line, along with all the fine things of youth, which do not change" (224). She is removed in space and locked in time.

Because she is an artist herself, Lucy understands these works as Harry cannot. Her rather self-effacing comments in the Chicago Art Institute, a distilled credo of Impressionism, make clear the fundamentally different ways of seeing between Lucy and Harry and emphasize, once again, distinctions Cather's artists always maintain, consciously or not, about facts and fictions. The contrast developed by and through Impressionism helps to explore what was always a complex human question for Cather, and offers a fresh angle of vision. The descriptive mode, inquiries about the life of art, and the poignant recognition of those aspects of life which are complicated rather than simplified by art are well represented in this novel's Impressionism in the fracturing, the spontaneity, and the brightness of elusive and haunting images. The images that represent the real Lucy cannot *be* real Lucy, and as Harry stares at the "three, light footprints running away" in the quiet "last intense light of the winter day," there comes an almost melancholy recognition of the limitations of art.

By developing in the narrative the very techniques that shape the argument, Cather has transformed the idea into a fact of the fiction. Full of an energy of description and image reliant on the visual arts, this novel stands out as a bold and successful technical experiment. Yet thematically, it is linked to a recognition of change and mutability — it represents a world where everything did not hold together. In using Impressionism in *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather continued to develop a long-standing interest in how the visual arts relate to writing, proving once more the power of her craft. At the same time, she transformed into the fiction a fundamental artistic belief she had come to time and again throughout her career. Its most energetic expression may have come in *The Song of the Lark*: "what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself . . . " (378). Transformed by experience and by life, Cather was perhaps finding the full and final articulation of that belief in the unpublished fragment "Light on Adobe Walls":

> Nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight. [The artist] can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it, or what it does to forms. He cannot even paint those relations of light and shade — he can only paint some emotion they gave him, some man-made arrangement of them that happens to give him personal delight . . . that makes one nerve in him thrill and tremble. At the bottom all he can give you is the thrill of his own poor little nerve — the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour, as temporary and almost as physical as a taste on the tongue. (123-24)

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Board News: The WCPM Board of Governors welcomed new member Virgil Albertini at its September meeting. Professor Albertini, Bibliographical Editor of *Western American Literature* and the *WCPM Newsletter*, has taught at Northwest Missouri State U. for 28 years and authorized several articles on Cather.

The Unreliable Narrator and Political Reality in "Two Friends"

Mark Sherf
Drew University

John Blake Bergers, *Beside the Red Brick Wall*
(Willa Cather Foundation Gallery)

1922 was a watershed year for Willa Cather. It marked the first time that a novel of hers, *One of Ours*, was critically denounced. She wrote that that year her "world broke in two." Despite winning the Pulitzer for the novel, Cather, recoiling from the book's critical reception, felt her world rupture. Suddenly, her way became impeded and marked with "the signs put up for motorists: 'ROAD UNDER REPAIR'" (NUF v). Merrill Maguire Skaggs points out that Cather, "through her later novels, . . . slowly works out her own salvation . . . [in an attempt] to weld her world whole again" (10). "Two Friends," written in 1931, is "based on a childhood memory" (Woodress 52) and refashioned by Cather into a dramatization of the breaking apart of a universe and of the effort to mend it. Its central motifs function as the narrator's navigation of a conflict-strewn road to her own redemption.

Cather's use of opposition, inherent to her writing, begins with two distinct centers of consciousness that parallel her own situation as the author of a childhood memory. The first is a young girl who lives in what she perceives to be a perfect world. The young girl cherishes the friendship of two men, Trueman and Dillon, and the harmony in which they lead their lives. The young girl as center of consciousness fills the narrative with its most concrete images, capturing the dynamics of the shaping of her youthful character by her relationship with Dillon and Trueman, who represent to her an amiable world, one as eternal as the stars in the sky:

> Wonderful things do happen even in the dullest places — in the cornfields and the wheat-fields. Sitting there on the edge of the sidewalk one summer night, my feet hanging in the warm dust, I saw an occultation of Venus. Only the three of us were there. It was a hot night, and the clerks had closed the store and gone home. Mr. Dillon and Mr. Trueman waited on a little while to watch. It was a very blue night, breathless and clear . . . . Presently we saw one bright star moving. Mr. Dillon called to me; told me to watch what was going to happen. (OD 213)

The narrator transcends her role as eavesdropper when invited by Dillon to be part of his world — one she associates with power and success. This intimacy makes it possible for her to experience an overpowering realization about her heroes' world. She connects the heaven's reliable movements with the relationship of Dillon and Trueman: "They seemed like two bodies held steady by some law of balance, an unconscious relation like that between the earth and the moon. It was this mathematical harmony which gave a third person pleasure" (OD 227).

The event, the occultation of Venus, that they witness together and which she compares to the friendship of the men, crystalizes her definition of "unalterable realities." Yet during the occultation the young narrator witnesses both the unity as well as division of the planets. Momentarily, the moon eclipses Venus and the two heavenly bodies create the illusion of one, united the way the girl perceives the friendship of Dillon and Trueman to be. Eventually "the planet swung clear of the golden disk, a rift of blue came between them and widened very fast" (OD 213). John J. Murphy comments that "in Cather's story ["Two Friends"] a moon drama forecasts the death of Dillon and Trueman's friendship . . . . [The occultation] parallels the coming together of the friends for a thirteen year friendship (they had been friends for ten years before the child knew them), and their eventual separation . . ." (40). The "rift" that occurs during the occultation reflects the realities of the world — the rupture of the two friends' relationship that the narrator will have to wrestle with when she becomes an adult.

In opposition to the child's narration is the second center of consciousness, the adult narrator who reflects on how the "rift" of the two friends' relationship destroyed her illusion of an eternally unalterable world. The rupture is her initiation into a world filled with "faltering and fear." The adult narrator, like Cather in 1922, must learn to navigate through a "road under repair." Painfully, the disillusioned adult narrator is reminded of her childhood road whenever she comes upon "a stretch of dusty white road drinking up the moonlight beside a blind wall, and . . . [feels] a sudden sadness. Perhaps it was not until the next morning I knew why, — and then only because I had dreamed of Mr. Dillon or Mr. Trueman in my sleep" (OD 229-30). The memory leads the narrator to reconstruct her childhood dream in which the friendship of Dillon and Trueman stake out the parameters of a young girl's world.

It is apparent that the narrator, continuously overwhelmed by her childhood memory, has never

regained her balance after the break-up of Dillon and Trueman: "Things were out of true, the equilibrium was gone" (OD 227). The loss of the friendship ends her "special pleasure of summer nights" (OD 226). The unalterable realities that emerge from "the strong, rich, outflowing silence between two friends, that was as full and satisfying as the moonlight" (OD 226), are forever lost to her. Thereafter much of her energy is consumed, as the writing of the short story indicates, by her need to understand why the world broke in two. In her narration she creates the young girl's center of consciousness, underscoring her need to maintain a close relationship with the young girl.

"Locating Cather's connecting paths is easy as a child's map game, for every novel has at least one," writes Skaggs (19). The connecting path in "Two Friends" is Main Street that runs through Singleton. Along with lending a kind of geographic awareness by locating this road where the world breaks in two, the road symbolizes the narrator's journey from childhood to adulthood, from where she tells her story; and it distinguishes, as well, between the two centers of consciousness. Initially, the road is portrayed as dream-like, expressing a young girl's naive beliefs:

> The road, just in front of the sidewalk where I sat and played jacks, would be ankle-deep in dust, and seemed to drink up the moonlight like folds of velvet. It drank up sound, too; muffled the wagon-wheels and hoof-beats; lay soft and meek like the last residuum of material things, — the soft bottom resting place. Nothing in the world, not snow mountains or blue seas, is so beautiful in moonlight as the soft, dry summer roads in a farming country, roads where the white dust falls back from the slow wagon-wheel. (OD 211-12)

Although the young girl realizes that the main street running through her hometown is "ankle-deep in dust," she thinks of it more ideally as "soft and meek" folds of velvet. This arises out of her misconception of the two friends' relationship to one another. What she sees as a perfect friendship, especially on moonlit nights when "they were always in their best form" (OD 210), she transfers to the road setting of the friendship, and thus a backwater town transforms into the most elegant spot on the map. These are the idealized moments of youth which are so important to the narrator. In the moonlight, the road is a vision of an "unalterable reality" (OD 193).

While the young girl loves her road, conversely the adult narrator no longer feels that roads can be "soft and meek." Instead, she believes that all roads are dusty and dry, and looking at them saddens her: "More than once, in Southern countries where there is a smell of dust and dryness in the air and the nights are intense, I have come upon a stretch of dusty white road drinking up the moonlight beside a blind wall, and have felt a sudden sadness" (OD 229). Whereas the young girl assesses only the one main road through Singleton, the adult narrator has been on roads through many "Southern countries." Even under moonlight, Main Street has become like every other street on which the narrator has travelled.

In the adult's story, the idealized visions of the child's consciousness have been replaced by sadness, for the narrator learns that roads extract a price from those who travel them. Ultimately, the narrator understands that life is filled with hazards, ruefully depicting how "faltering and fear" (OD 193) are universal. She notes that "the invention of the motorcar (which has made more changes in the world than the War, which indeed produced the particular kind of war that happened just a hundred years after Waterloo)" (OD 194) underscores conflict and change; only hard and unyielding roads accommodate war vehicles. Even as the narrator tells the story of her childhood at the turn of the century, she is trying to make sense of a world that had just fought a modern war with machine guns, airplanes and tanks. The references to World War I, Cather's focus in *One of Ours*, and to Waterloo emphasize a history dominated by wars that tear the world apart.

Contrasting the very different worlds that the two centers of consciousness present establishes but one of the story's central oppositions. Another one exists between the two friends themselves, Dillon and Trueman. This opposition allows the narrator to investigate and perhaps understand the tensions that precipitate world shattering confrontations. R. E. Dillon is of Irish extraction, and even though his proximate ancestors were probably immigrants, he realizes success as "the principal banker . . . and proprietor of the large general store" (OD 195). His friend, J. H. Trueman, the Republican, is originally from old American stock in Buffalo. He comes West and succeeds as a cattleman. The possibility of such diverse characters welding together seems unlikely, for, to begin with, the Irish at the turn of the century, "despite their long experience in America . . . had achieved little economic security. Factory whistles summoned few Irishmen in the morning, nor were many working as skilled craftsmen or small businessmen. They congregated in the city slums, where the men sought poorly paid unskilled jobs" (Jensen 296). Stereotypically, Dillon would not be a banker at this time in American history and his best friend would not be Trueman, whose patrician old family money designated his "countenance . . . as unmistakably American as Dillon's was not" (OD 196). Their diverse social standings create a dubious friendship so that in retrospect it is not surprising that it ruptured.

Trueman, with his patrimony, has carved out a position in Singleton as the big cattle man; leading an indulgent life — "he walked about the town . . . like the walking elephant labelled 'G.O.P.'" (OD 208). He is "in general . . . large and indifferent about money matters, — always carried a few hundred-dollar bills in his inside coat-pocket, and left his coat hanging anywhere" (OD 201). Trueman, a bachelor, is also free to play cards late every night and associate with a woman

who runs a celebrated sporting house. Dillon, on the other hand, "like to regulate other people's affairs" (OD 215). He "detested gambling, often dropped a contemptuous word about 'poker bugs' before [Trueman's poker buddies] the horse-trader and the billiard-hall man and the cashier of the other bank" (OD 201).

The inevitable rupture of the friendship occurs after Dillon hears Bryan's "cross of gold" speech. Dillon, "a family man and a good Catholic" (OD 215), is mesmerized by Populist reform that will "get the tramps off the railroad, and manage to run [Singleton] with one fancy house instead of two, and have a Federal Government that is honest . . ." (OD 214). The world that seems so secure to the child cracks as the choice of a political party determines battle lines, for Trueman is an "American of that period, not of this. He did not belong to the time of efficiency and advertising and progressive methods" (OD 196). As a Republican, he believes that business should remain a "personal adventure" (OD 218), and Bryan's populism would introduce government regulation, threatening Trueman's way of life. He breaks off his friendship with Dillon, who, as a Populist Democrat, is now the enemy of Trueman's America. Clearly their path, the road, diverges.

The political contrast segues other historical events with the rhetorical purpose of questioning the futility of war and politics. In "Two Friends," the narrator determines that the issues of the 1896 election were not important enough to end the friendship. She regrets the friends' separation because she has "the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted" (OD 230). The adult narrator's analysis breaks down at this point. Even though Cather creates diverse characters in Dillon and Trueman to underscore how unlikely their friendship is, the narrator remains under the illusion that their friendship could have been "easily" saved.

The narrator's analysis of her world seems unreliable. All of the narrator's historical references in the story — the election, Waterloo, the invention of the car and World War I — are events that she connects with shattered worlds. The events rob the narrator of her illusion of unalterable realities. But her inability to confront the factors that made Waterloo or the break-up of Dillon and Trueman or World War I so probable reveals that even though she is an adult she still prefers to analyze her world through the eyes of a child. The childhood memories contrast the world of pain and "rift" the adult lives in. Yet, as mentioned earlier, even the memories portend "rift." In describing the end of the occultation she suggests that Venus moving beyond the moon, like Trueman leaving Dillon, is a "rift," a "bright wart [appearing] on the other edge of the moon" (OD 213). Her most poignant childhood memory, the occultation, alludes to worlds breaking in two.

One way of getting at Cather is through her first sentences and paragraphs. The first paragraph of "Two Friends" reveals the narrator's preference to live in the past, for as a youth she had the naivete and passion to find exhilarating "unalterable realities." The adult has lived in a broken universe and consequently lost that ability. Instead, she perpetually draws back to childhood recollections that "are merely pictures, vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us [adults] courage" (OD 193).

> Even in early youth, when the mind is so eager for the new and untried, while it is still a stranger to faltering and fear, we yet like to think that there are certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things. (OD 193)

To the narrator the lost friendship is a "truth that was accidentally distorted — one of the truths we want to keep" (OD 230). Ironically it is the narrator who distorts the truth, creating an elusive myth that always returns her to Singleton. Clearly Cather, unlike her narrator, did not respond "to the age-old question: What does one do when the world breaks in two; what then?" (Skaggs 10) by reliving the same narrative over and over. Unlike the narrator of her story, Cather fashions countless fictions in her own attempt to "weld her world whole again." Accordingly, "Two Friends" represents a single, brief fiction that must be combined with Cather's other works written after 1922 to appreciate the full scope of her attempt to restore her broken world.

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♦ ♦ ♦

Some News on Our Contributors

Patrick W. Shaw's new book on Cather, *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict*, was due out from Whitston in July and should be available soon from WCPM. The working title of Laura Winters's book from Susquehanna U. Press is *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile*. Thanks to Merrill Skaggs for encouraging her students Holly Messitt and Mark Sherf to contribute to *WCPMN*.

"I Too Am Untranslatable": Failings of Filming *O Pioneers!*

Cecilia Konchar Farr
Brigham Young University

Ad Poster by Robert T. Barrett for Salt Lake City's Pioneer Theatre Company production of the Cloud adaptation of O Pioneers!, *February 10-27, 1993.*

Willa Cather wrote of *O Pioneers!* that "the country insisted on being the hero of my book, and I did not interfere." This is surely a strange statement about a novel with as powerful a heroine as Alexandra Bergson and as strong a love story as Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson's. Both recent video productions of *O Pioneers!* — the Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation starring Jessica Lange and the American Playhouse filming of the stageplay — suffer under the burden of deciding who or what is the hero of this novel.

Clearly there is a precedent for this confusion. One early critic of the novel called it a "loosely constructed . . . series of separate scenes with so slight cohesion that a rude touch might almost be expected to shatter it" (qtd. in Murphy 113). Cather's friend Elizabeth Sergeant decided that the novel was structurally unsound because it had "no skeleton" (Woodress 238). Many have written of the novel's "duality." James Woodress's biographical account of Cather's writing of the novel bears this out. Cather had, he writes, "a moment of illumination" when, living in Pittsburgh in 1912, she laid two stories side by side and found that they belonged together. One, "Alexandra," contained most of part I of *O Pioneers!*. The second, "The White Mulberry Tree" was the story of Frank Shabata's murder of his wife, Marie, and her lover, Emil Bergson (231). Together, these two stories became *O Pioneers!*.

The first decision the Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation should have made was to turn to the novel and not to its author to unscramble these confusing signals about the plot of *O Pioneers!*. Director Glenn Jordan reported in a recent interview his desire to "be as faithful to [the novel] as possible." A laudable goal. But he also admits that he felt "Willa Cather [was] looking over my shoulder — and I [wanted] her to be pleased" ("Interview" 48). Readers of this novel have long known that, despite Cather's inimitable powers of description when it comes to Nebraska landscapes, and despite her often-quoted statement about the hero of this novel, the land is decidedly not the central player in *O Pioneers!*. In the novel, if not in Cather's letters, the landscape is eclipsed by the indomitable Alexandra Bergson.

The story begins and ends with the land because, as many critics have pointed out, Cather aimed to locate this novel in the epic and pastoral traditions of literature. Thus she moves in the first pages from the universal to the particular and in the final paragraphs from the particular to the universal. She places Alexandra in relation to the land, to her community, and to future generations. As Sharon O'Brien argues, Cather was also rewriting the myths of the American frontier:

> suggesting that the essential quality of America resides not in the unsettled land but in the transformation from 'The Wild Land' to 'Neighboring Fields,' the process of inhabitation that made writers like Cooper and Twain uneasy but provided, in her view, a more accurate representation of the immigrants' desires and accomplishments. . . . Cather both connected Alexandra's story to the pioneer experience and declared that her novel was not an isolated text but part of a shared endeavor by American writers to understand American history and culture. (433)

But the novel turns to Alexandra after making bows to myth, conventions and tradition. John Murphy points out that notwithstanding all the disparate elements in the novel — "domestic drama, social satire, stories of friendship love and illicit passion, manslaughter and spiritual struggle" — Alexandra stands at the center as "the integrating factor." It is through Alexandra, he argues, that "Cather achieves unity despite her novel's dualistic beginnings" (114).

Cather's Alexandra fills the novel with a body "that no man on the Divide could have carried very far" (206). Such physical largeness is unpopular in our glossy world of Nike ads and "the beauty myth."[1] Alexandra is large, I imagine, like few women we see on film. Not large like a lean fashion model. Not, in fact, "large" like Jessica Lange. But this is quibbling. Lange's powers of performance, which are significant, and the obvious padding in her gown, could have overcome this minor inconsistency. But this casting decision seemed indicative of the production's attempt to make Alexandra smaller and less important, to

reduce her to a supporting role to the broad camera sweeps of the on-location set. The decision to cast a tentative and unskilled actress as the young Alexandra adds to this impression.

Despite these attempts to undermine her role, Lange does, in fact, outshine the other, mostly unknown, actors in the Hallmark film. The scene in which she squares her shoulders and suggests to her thick brothers that they should consult a lawyer if they have any further questions about the ownership of her land does justice to the heroic Alexandra. Lange's resolute bearing and her sense of Alexandra's quiet emotional strength, "armored in calm," overcome some awkwardness in dialogue, especially between her and Carl (135).

But in their depiction of the Carl relationship, both productions fall short. Literature has come much further in "writing beyond" the traditional endings for women than film has, and these two productions of *O Pioneers!* demonstrate this discrepancy.[2] In film and on television (as in early fiction) women's roles have traditionally been restricted to the romance plot. When women move away from romance to develop friendships or to pursue more independent lives without male companions, our society generally uses them as "bad role models" for women — witness Murphy Brown and Thelma and Louise. Though the American Playhouse production seems much more willing to let Alexandra's character dominate the stage, it, too, fails to encompass what an unusual heroine she is.

Woodress writes that "the creation of a strong female protagonist in *O Pioneers!* has given feminist critics a novel to admire" (245). We admire her flaw of having "too much independence," and some of us even admire her for "growing hard" (and strong) in response to her hard life and for being (justifiably) intolerant of her silly brothers. These flaws humanize the mythic character of Earth-mother that Alexandra threatens, much like Ántonia, to become. But perhaps the most human aspect of Alexandra is her admitted need for friendship. She loves and confides in Carl, Marie, Emil, Ivar and Signa. She supports them and believes in them always "as she had believed in the land" (239).

Neither film captures the tenderness of the bond between Alexandra and Marie, as they wear down the path between the two farms (the path that Carl and Alexandra had used as children), comforting and sustaining each other. The two of them, Cather writes, "made a pretty picture in the sunlight, the leafy pattern surrounding them like a net" (135). This sense of connectedness between two women, which clearly Cather valued personally, is not the stuff of movies which live still in the tradition of the romance plot, of "Pretty Woman" and "Beauty and the Beast." Though the Hallmark film does have more heartfelt exchanges between these two characters than does the American Playhouse version, neither seems to find anything for these two women to be intimate about but men. Marie teases Alexandra about Carl and Alexandra counsels Marie about Frank and Emil. I miss the scene in the orchard where Marie plays with the ribbons of Alexandra's discarded shade hat.

But the greater flaw is the failure of both films even to scratch the surface the deep, abiding friendship of Carl and Alexandra. Both begin too early to hint of romance. Marie smiles knowingly at Alexandra in the Hallmark film and says "Carl Lindstrum was your young man, wasn't he?" Alexandra replies (once more with dignity), "He was my best friend." Oh, sure, Marie smiles, we know that story. Friend. Uh-huh. When Carl returns, Alexandra, as portrayed by Lange, actually giggles and plays with her hair. In the stage version, Mary McDonnell (who starred opposite Kevin Costner in "Dances with Wolves") portrays a more composed but hardly less obviously lovestruck Alexandra than Lange's. Even in their youthful parting, McDonnell's Alexandra comes across more as the spurned lover than the bereft friend.

O'Brien describes, more accurately, Alexandra's "unconventional relationship with Carl, *the friend she will someday marry*" (443; emphasis mine), and admires Cather's resistance to the usual marriage plot. Cather's resistance was deliberate. She disliked "the one string" of female narrative — of woman and love, and, according to her letters, she specifically set out to write a different story for Alexandra. Clearly she was contrasting the passion of Marie and Emil with the friendship of Alexandra and Carl. Of course, both films, with years of precedent behind them, succeed in their depictions of the passionate couple. Though Anne Heche is an almost irresistible Marie in the Hallmark film, the couple's fateful and inevitable pull toward each other comes across more powerfully in the stage version.

Overall, I find the stark American Playhouse production much more true to the novel and its careful development of character than the more lush Hallmark Hall of Fame TV movie. However, despite the obvious challenge of creating a sense of vastness in an enclosed space, the American Playhouse version, too, tends to dwarf the characters as they huddle on the broad stage with the huge, blank backdrop behind them. I felt like someone should remind both directors that this novel is called *O Pioneers!* and not *Nebraska!*.

Others who side stalwartly with Cather's contention about the land being her hero will undoubtedly find the Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation's panoramas and lingering landscapes more satisfying. I'm an American literature professor, so I have to insist that neither movie ever quite lives up to the book. But this book seems especially untranslatable into contemporary culture, with its suggestion of female epic heroism and its cynicism toward the traditional romance plot. Even Hallmark and PBS have yet to do justice to a heroine like Alexandra Bergson.

(Notes on Next Page)

NOTES

The first part of my title is quoted from line 1322 of Whitman's "Song of Myself."

1. My reference to "the beauty myth" comes from the recent feminist bestseller of the same name, by Naomi Wolf (New York: Morrow, 1991).

2. *Writing Beyond the Ending* is the title and main idea of Rachel Blau DePlessis's 1985 book about narrative strategies in women's fiction (Bloomington: Indiana UP).

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Inroads Through the Desert: Willa Cather's Reception in Saudi Arabia

Asad Al-Ghalith
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During my four-year tenure (1985-89) as Assistant Professor of English at Umm Al-Qura University in the mountainous royal resort city of Taif, Saudi Arabia, I had the experience of teaching a variety of undergraduate fiction courses to Saudi men and women. In Saudi Arabia, teaching poses a unique opportunity, since separation of the sexes in educational institutions frequently necessitates the duplication of courses — one to be taught in the men's section, and the same course to be delivered to the women's section via TV monitor and microphone. When I decided to introduce Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* alongside the more highly touted American and British mainstream authors, I was not prepared for the students' reaction: Willa Cather's appeal to both men and women was outstanding, and their response to Cather was by far strongest and interest in her work greater than that of any other author I had taught. When the department announced it would offer its Special Author course, both men and women, acting independently, petitioned the department to offer Willa Cather as that special author, thereby preempting the usual department favorites — Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Dickens. Permission granted for teaching this author, I was selected to be the instructor. Due to the consistent high regard and enthusiasm of the students for Cather, I can verily say I have never enjoyed a course as much as I did this one.

In trying to ascertain possible reasons for this sustained appeal, I struck on the following: Saudi students today hark back to a past redolent with their own cultural version of Catherian hard primitivism. They actually long for those days when their grandparents had to roam the desert for their meager living. The Bedouin of this earlier era lived close to the land and nature, and they were dependent on animals and what those animals could provide. Now, however, my students' parents, having adopted an abhorrence to what they consider as socially demeaning, lower-class activity, relegate most of the physical and manual labor to foreign nationals. Their children, my students, have gradually become aware of the values they have lost and no longer inherit from their parents, and they feel impelled to seek an understanding of a glorious past thematically related to Willa Cather's world before it "broke in two." Their mothers continue nurturing large families like Ántonia Shimerda's, but they have lost touch with the work ethic of Ántonia because of their easy dependence on maids, servants, and chauffeurs.

A Lost Lady and *My Ántonia* triggered in these students a reminder of the social and moral dislocation of a new era. They live in a transitional era themselves, engendered by the oil boom of the '70s and '80s. New-found materialistic values and consumption of material goods replaced the simple demands of the tribal or Bedouin lifestyle of their families. Relatives and neighbors who formerly had lived in the same village for decades or centuries are now dispersed as they and their children seek the cities for easily acquired petro-dollars. The spirit of rural cooperation has turned into rigorous urban competition for wealth; the simple desire to survive the hardships of the desert has turned into the insatiable appetite for the means to attain luxury — a Cadillac has replaced the camel, a palace the tent, and a microwave the fireplace.

To a people accustomed to the elements of light and space as daily phenomena of the desert surrounding them, Willa Cather's concerns for the depiction of the effects of light within the vastness of prairie and desert space hit a resonant chord in my students. In particular, they admired the desert descriptions in *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* In the same novel, they also saw Bishop Latour's struggle against corrupt priests and superstitions as a parallel to the archetypal journey of the Prophet Mohammed seeking the solitude of the desert for meditation and spiritual revelation, and his subsequent struggle against corruption, idol-worship, and superstition.

Furthermore, Willa Cather is known for her great reserve in dealing with the issue of sex; her restraint is a decided advantage for her in a society wherein open discussion of sexual topics is taboo. In Saudi colleges, instructors are given explicit and elaborate directives to avoid selecting literature with any overtly sexual descriptions, so when students *and* instructors feel comfortable discussing a writer and her work, the experience is more likely to prove positive.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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INROADS . . . IN SAUDI ARABIA
(Continued)

Finally, I can see that Willa Cather's accessible language, her clear, simple classical style, made her motifs and messages easy for the Saudi students to grasp. The style enabled the students to appreciate and respond to the novels' coding of their cultural and emotional experiences. I hope soon to pursue whatever additional inroads Cather may have made into Saudi hearts, to see if her popularity has continued during my absence.

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